

FY24 Appropriations Sign-on: FRIENDS OF THE SPECIAL SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION PROGRAM FOR WOMEN, INFANTS, AND CHILDREN (WIC) (c/o National WIC Association)

*** This letter is for national organizations***

*** Deadline to sign on is COB Tuesday, March 21, 2023***

*** Please reach out to Nell Menefee-Libey, Senior Public Policy Associate at the National WIC Association, with any questions: nmenefeelibey@nwica.org ***

March 21, 2023

Dear Chair Granger, Ranking Member DeLauro, Chair Murray, and Vice Chair Collins: For nearly fifty years, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) has proven to be one of the most cost-efficient federal investments. In 2022, WIC experienced unprecedented pressures on program funding, including nationwide shortages of infant formula. Recognizing WIC's proven track record of building a healthier start for America's next generation, the undersigned organizations – a diverse coalition of maternal and public health organizations, children's advocates, agriculture partners, and retail and industry stakeholders – urge Congress to reiterate its longstanding bipartisan commitment to WIC. **We specifically urge \$6.35 billion in WIC budget authority for fiscal year 2024, ongoing authority for the WIC fruit and vegetable bump, clear commitment to the scientific integrity of WIC's food packages, and increased set-aside funding for WIC Management Information Systems.**

Investing in proven, early interventions to strengthen nutrition security is demonstrated to grow a healthier population and reduce healthcare expenditures in the long-term. In 2018, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimated that Medicaid and Medicare spent more than \$207 billion to treat chronic diet-related conditions like diabetes and cardiovascular disease – approximately 15.3% of *all* Medicaid and Medicare spending. WIC's role in assuring healthier birth outcomes more than doubles its return on investment: for every dollar spent on WIC, about \$2.48 is returned in healthcare cost savings. WIC's cost savings are likely even more pronounced, as healthier WIC foods over the past decade contributed to a 9% decline in childhood obesity among WIC-enrolled toddlers.



Consistent with decades of precedent, Congress should ensure adequate funding to support WIC's growing caseload and prevent shortfalls that necessitate waiting lists or other measures that could adversely impact the program's reach and public health impacts. Especially as WIC accounted for 22.3% of discretionary funding in the fiscal year 2023 Agriculture Appropriations bill, **we urge you to consider WIC funding dynamics – including growing participation and unforeseen costs absorbed in fiscal years 2022 and 2023 – in the context of broader allocations across the subcommittees and increase the Agriculture Appropriations allocation accordingly.**

In 2022, WIC navigated extraordinary challenges to sustain the program's nutrition support for an even larger share of the eligible population. Rising food costs presented new challenges for families, but WIC's program structure absorbs these costs for food categories that are issued by quantity (in lieu of a cash-value). The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service estimates that grocery prices increased 11% over the course of 2022, with even more significant increases in critical WIC food categories (e.g., 70% increase to eggs, 16% increase to cereals and whole grains, and 14% increase to dairy products).

WIC food dollars were further depleted to cover the cost of alternative brand infant formulas as the effects of Abbott Nutrition's recall were felt nationwide. Starting in May 2022, WIC funds were used to provide alternative brand options in States that did not contract with Abbott Nutrition.^{vi} This strategy was effective in mitigating the program-specific effects of the nationwide shortages on WIC participants, but WIC once again absorbed new and unforeseen costs to defray unexpected financial burdens on State governments and WIC participants.

Program costs are also increasing due to higher participation rates, which reflects improvements in service delivery that expands the program's reach and public health impacts. In fiscal year 2022, USDA estimated that 6.26 million participants received WIC services. In the first two months of fiscal year 2023, USDA estimates that WIC participation has increased to 6.37 million individuals. The National WIC Association estimates that an average of 6.5 million participants will be certified for WIC services through fiscal year 2024.

Even with these new funding pressures, **we remain steadfastly in support of the fruit and vegetable increases included in bipartisan appropriations legislation in fiscal years 2022 and 2023.** Appropriators wisely aligned WIC issuance with amounts reported by the National Academies of Sciences that deliver approximately 50% of fruit and vegetable intake recommended by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Initial evidence reported by the National WIC Association and Nutrition Policy Institute identify that WIC's fruit and vegetable bump has already improved fruit and vegetable consumption among WIC-enrolled toddlers, including through purchase of a greater variety of produce. Consistent with prior bipartisan appropriations legislation and USDA's request, Congress should sustain the authority for this fruit and vegetable bump in fiscal year 2024.

USDA wisely incorporated this science-based recommendation and Congressionally-directed adjustment into its recent proposed updates to the broader WIC food packages. Under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, USDA is directed by statute to commission an independent scientific review and adjust issuance to reflect nutrition



science, public health concerns, and cultural eating patterns.x With limited resources that constitute less than 10% of an average grocery budget, the WIC food packages are carefully crafted to deliver priority nutrients and introduce program participants to a broad range of nutrient-dense foods. **We are opposed to legislative efforts – including riders in the appropriations process – that would undermine the independent, science-based updates to the WIC food packages.** We have confidence that USDA will consider the thoughtful input from a broad range of stakeholders during the public comment period while honoring the independent, science-based recommendations of the National Academies of Sciences.

Congress should maintain longstanding set-asides for breastfeeding peer counselors (\$90 million) and infrastructure (\$14 million) that contribute to WIC's ongoing service model. Additionally, Congress should revitalize the Management Information System (MIS) set-aside authorized under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. Updates to WIC's complex computer systems will be essential as the program continues to transition to modern service delivery models, with updates needed to implement the revised food packages, further integrate with healthcare databases, and scale up new transaction technologies like online and mobile payments. The National WIC Association recommends that Congress institute a \$50 million set-aside for Management Information Systems in fiscal year 2024.

WIC's long record of public health success is well positioned to have broader impacts as the program reaches more eligible families and modernizes its service delivery model to reflect commercial practice in healthcare and retail settings. As Congress begins the process of evaluating fiscal year 2024 appropriations, we urge Congress to renew its ongoing bipartisan commitment to WIC's role in strengthening nutrition security and improving health outcomes that lay the foundation for healthier futures for moms and young children.

Sincerely,

National WIC Association
[additional organizations]

cc: The Honorable Andy Harris
The Honorable Sanford Bishop
The Honorable Martin Heinrich
The Honorable John Hoeven

 rdaeger@gmail.com (not shared) [Switch account](#)



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